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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version
Stellungnahme / comment

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Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Hulsman, J. C. (2007). *The most important American primary is already over*. (DGAP-Standpunkt, 8). Berlin: Forschungsinstitut der Deutschen Gesellschaft für Auswärtige Politik e.V.. <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-130334>

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The Most Important American Primary Is Already Over

John C. Hulsman

Im amerikanischen Vorwahlkampf ist eine der wichtigsten Vorentscheidungen bereits gefallen: das Rennen um das meiste Geld. Im System der Vorwahlen, das sich durch das Vorverlegen wichtiger Primaries deutlich verdichtet hat, ist das Einsammeln hoher und höchster Wahlkampfspenden so wichtig wie nie zuvor. Wo früher der persönliche Kontakt des Kandidaten zum Wähler noch möglich war und so auch Außenseiter eine Chance auf Erfolg hatten, können Kandidaten heute nur noch über teure Fernsehwerbung ein Profil gewinnen. Schon hat sich das Feld der aussichtsreichen Kandidaten erheblich gelichtet – und das obwohl dies die erste auf beiden Seiten offene Wahl seit fast 70 Jahren ist. Diese Verschiebung wird das amerikanische politische System verändern – wahrscheinlich nicht zu seinem Vorteil.

In the run-up to the 1976 presidential election, then unknown governor Jimmy Carter hit upon an ingenious idea to save money for his fledgling campaign. Rather than spending each night at a low-budget hotel in Iowa, which was the first state to hold a presidential caucus, Carter would instead stay with friends and campaign supporters, traveling throughout the state sort of like an unwanted relative.

Boy, have things changed.

Fast forward to March 2007, with the release of most of the American presidential candidates' first quarter fund-raising totals, a full 10 months before anyone votes in the first primary, we can see the field was already decisively been winnowed to seven. A country of 300 million people can, even in this most open presidential race since the 1920s, reliably say only one of a handful of people will be the new chief executive.

That's because the single most important contest, the money primary, is over.

To give you an idea of how all previous presidential spending is dwarfed by what is going on now, one has only to look at the fact that former Vice President Al Gore, the former fund-raising champ, raised \$8.9 million dollars at the comparable time in 1999 during the start-up of his campaign. Compare this with the first quarter numbers for candidates in 2007: Senator Hillary Clinton-\$26 million; former Governor Mitt Romney-\$23 million; former New York Mayor Rudy Giuliani-\$15 million; former Senator John Edwards-\$14 million; Senator John McCain-\$12.5 million. These are not candidates; they are multinational corporations.

To realistically play in the presidential poker game, just to get to the table, a whopping \$75–100 million is going to be the entry fee.

But it's not just the cash. The front-loading of the primary season, plus the need for massive fund-raising, is what makes the money primary so decisive this time around. And it all started so sensibly. States such as California, which if it were a country would comfort-

ably qualify as a member of the Group of Eight (G8) most advanced industrial nations, have tired of footing the primary bill for small unrepresentative states, such as New Hampshire and Iowa. As California's primary tended to be at the end of the political season, when the nomination was almost already decided, this drastically limited the political influence of this most populous and representative state. Instead, relative dwarfs like Iowa, New Hampshire, and South Carolina exercised a vastly disproportionate influence over the presidential process.

Having had enough, California decided to move its primary forward to early February, immediately after Iowa, New Hampshire, and South Carolina. This triggered an avalanche from other large states, which echoed with the logic of Governor Schwarzenegger. As a result, this year's contest is ridiculously front-loaded, with a full 25 percent of all delegates being chosen on February 5th, 2008, immediately after New Hampshire votes.

One of the strengths of the old system was the lesson Jimmy Carter and even Bill Clinton learned so well; 'retail politics,' candidates actually having to meet locals, shake their hands, talk to them for a spell, were what propelled candidates through the first early days of their campaigns. The new system does away with all that. Given the vast number of states to cover, and the very limited time to do so, television, particularly television advertising, is the only way to prepare for February 5th. And running television ads across one-quarter of the country in the run-up to February 5th is going to be hideously expensive. That is what makes the money primary so vital, and so tragic.

For two vital things have been lost. First, the Jeffersonian necessity of candidates talking to real human beings has given way to them instead hearing the antiseptic reports of their media advisors about what sells with focus groups. Second, the ability of a candidate, like Robert Kennedy in 1968, Jimmy Carter in

1976, Ronald Reagan in 1980, Gary Hart in 1984, and Bill Clinton in 1992, to come out of nowhere, engage America and change the tenor of the political debate, with ideas playing a major part in their rise, is gone.

With the triumph of the money primary, the days of political surprises in American politics are over. Based on money, give me a mere seven options and I can definitely tell you who will be the next president (Hillary, Obama, Edwards, Rudy, McCain, Romney, or Thompson). Instead, it signals the triumph of wealthy funders controlling ever more of the American political process.

This is not good for America, nor indeed for the rest of the world.



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